

XTREMUS by Peter Wiesner
Synopsis

Condor leads a double life. His animated tattoos have singled him out for a secret quest, impelling him to betray his colleagues and to desert his post with the Bionicans. Haunted by visions of his dead mother, who led the disastrous Xtreme Marketing Movement that led to eco terrorism, his quest is to determine whether outsiders could build weapons of mass destruction by accessing The Well.

Condor leads a squad of “Hackers” who regulate and monitor access to The Well by “Users” who have only read-access to this database. The Well, which resides in the minds of the Bionican, is the single remaining link to the information about high technology. It is the only monument of the sophisticated civilization that was destroyed when eco terrorists unleashed a computer virus that eliminated people with brain implants. Condor’s job is to make sure that none of his “Users” violate The Well. Repeat offenders are put to death and fed to the vultures.

Condor’s Bionicans are one of three major surviving tribes in Southern California. Squatting in the ruins of Santa Monica, they are a hippie-like tribe of militant environmentalists who communicate with The Well through “teach-ins” during which they exalt the wisdom of past, drawn largely from the counterculture of the 1960’s. The Bionicans cultivate Soma, a plant that produces a drug that guarantees harmony and happiness in their otherwise squalid lives. Soma is also traded to the Greeks through the network of dealers controlled by the Goths.

The violent but robust Goths, headquartered in the San Fernando Valley, control the roads and slave trade, and spend their time drinking mead and refurbishing ancient automobiles and trucks. They are opposed to all book learning but prize oral poetry to the extent that bad poetry is punishable by death.

The decadent Greeks, who live further north in Santa Barbara, depend on slavery to provide them with leisure time for cultural pursuits, particularly the revival of the ancient Greek classics. They operate antique stores and organize museum exhibits about the civilizations of bygone eras. The Bionicans fear that if the Greeks were to gain access to The Well, they might be able to rebuild technology and manufacture weapons of mass destruction.

As instructed by Brok, the dwarf, Condor changes his username to match circumstances, initially to “Siegfried” to hide his Bionican identity from the Goths, and much later to “Jason” to hide his identity from the Greeks. Brok also shows him old videos in which dead mother comes alive to discuss how the Xtreme Marketing Movement sought to save the world by forcing consumers to opt for virtual instead of material goods to save the planet’s environment.

Leaving Bionica, Condor’s quest takes him through the ruins and litter of a destroyed civilization. He meets an old Indian who tries to set him straight spiritually and a retired entrepreneur who knows about the origins of The Well. Then he comes across a couple of elderly cultural anthropologists who provide him with a humorous account of the Goths. His murderous tendencies surface when he encounters an old evangelical Christian who tries to convert him by spouting scripture. Reverting to his hacker persona, he “martyrs” the Christian and later also kills the lovely Bead Lady who tries to dissuade him from pursuing his quest.

With help from the powerful Medea, his virtual half-sister and secret lover, he works his way up the Goth chain of command, betrays his best friend, kills off his rivals in gladiatorial

combat, marries the Goth princess, Tara, after killing her father, Olin, who opposed the union, and takes his place as leaders of the Goths.

But, our hero does not succeed with the Goths. His marriage to Tara falls apart and he drives her to suicide, a year after the birth their son, Pericles. The Goths rise against Condor because of his inability to deliver a sincere poem during an oral poetry mash-up. Medea covertly helps our hero flee while at the same time forging a devious power alliance with the Goths through Tara's brother, Thor. She arranges a safe house for Siegfried and tells him to change his username to Jason.

Under his new name, "Jason," our hero spends an idyllic year on Medea's antebellum plantation and masters the Greek classics under the tutelage of her three sisters, Media, Meditation, and Song. Medea pulls strings so that Jason is inducted into the Praetorian Guard, which authorizes him to conduct search and destroy missions to promote Greek interests, especially the Soma trade. He gets into trouble because of his brutal massacre of Christian missionaries, who are disrupting Soma trafficking. One of the three sisters, Song, who is in love with Jason, kills herself upon learning about Jason's war crimes.

Medea steps in to do damage control by helping Jason change from military to educational pursuits. She arranges a position for him to promote the teachings of the Greek Classics to young people. This is ironic because our hero is not directly involved in the education of his own intellectually gifted son, Pericles. Pericles, a Wunderkind intellectual, is involved with a group of "techies" who are building a primitive communications system from 20th Century electronic scraps. This arouses Jason's suspicion that his own son might be involved in the subversive revival of technology.

One day Jason Pericles disappears. Jason is chagrined to find out that his son has joined the Bionicans to develop his interest in music through The Well. Medea convinces Jason to return to Bionica to retrieve and reprogram his son. He reluctantly agrees, knowing the risks of his being a fugitive. Again, Jason goes back to this original username, "Condor," repeating it three times to take effect.

Our hero retraces the steps from many years ago when he left Bionica as a young man. He stops by the house of the Bead Lady, which is now inhabited by an old blind lady, who curses him. He then goes to another house inhabited by the skeleton of an intellectual who mocks him. He finally reaches Bionica and first sees the dwarf, Brok, who tells him that his quest is nearly over and that there will be a reality show to honor him.

Condor finds out that his son, who has become a naked dancer, is completely taken in by the Bionicans. Meanwhile, Brok and Medea orchestrate a "this is your life" type of roast attended by avatars of every significant person in his life, including the ones he killed.

Condor realizes that his quest failed. He betrayed and was betrayed. Instead of becoming compassionate human being able to think for himself, Condor squandered his mental resources on an illusory quest that had become increasingly prone to "mission creep." He had opportunities to become fully realized through friendship and love. His life has gone full circle and he has nowhere else to go but to Bionica where his former hacker colleagues take their revenge.

The only female hacker, Digi Diva, executes Condor with a single blow to the head, and so his quest is over, and the butterflies of his unrealized dreams and hopes are set free.